

NCA

VOC FOR IOP/FN
BACKGROUND 1-0818
MARK HOPKINS/BERLIN

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BERLIN: DIPLOMATIC COMMUNITY MILIEU

ANNCR:

FOR WESTERN DIPLOMATS, LIFE IN EASTERN BERLIN IS DIFFERENT FROM LIFE ANYWHERE IN COMMUNIST COUNTRIES. VOA CORRESPONDENT MARK HOPKINS IS IN THE EAST GERMAN CAPITAL AND HAS A REPORT. VOICE:

WESTERN DIPLOMATS IN OTHER COMMUNIST COUNTRIES MAKE DO WITH WHAT THEY HAVE, LIVING WITH SHORTAGES AND INCONVENIENCES, TAKING OCCASIONAL TRIPS TO THE WEST TO RELIEVE THE SCENE.

BUT HERE IN EAST BERLIN, THE WEST IS JUST A FEW MINUTES DRIVE AWAY -- ACROSS THE BERLIN WALL INTO WEST BERLIN. AND THIS MAKES FOR A DIFFERENT LIFE FOR THE DIPLOMATS AND THEIR FAMILIES -- FROM BRITAIN, FRANCE, THE UNITED STATES, AMONG OTHERS -- WHO BECAUSE OF THEIR DIPLOMATIC STATUS CAN TRAVEL FREELY BETWEEN EAST AND WEST BERLIN.

AMERICAN SCHOOLCHILDREN ARE TAUGHT NOT HERE, BUT IN WEST BERLIN. A SMALL BUS PICKS THEM UP EACH MORNING AND DRIVES THEM THROUGH THE FAMOUS "CHECKPOINT CHARLIE" TO THEIR SCHOOL. IT IS INCONGRUOUS IN A WAY -- THESE CHILDREN PASSING THROUGH THE BERLIN WALL TWICE A DAY AS IF IT WERE THE MOST NORMAL THING TO DO. STILL, THE VOPOS -- THE EAST GERMAN PEOPLES POLICE WHO GUARD THE WALL -- WATCH THE SMALL SCHOOL BUS AS IT MOVES SLOWLY THROUGH THE ZIG-ZAG CONCRETE BLOCKS, FLANKED ON EITHER SIDE WITH TANK TRAPS AND WIRE FENCE.

THE WESTERN DIPLOMATS ASSIGNED TO EAST BERLIN DRIVE THROUGH THE WALL CROSSINGS WITH THE SAME EASE. THEY GO TO LUNCH SOMEDAYS AT A BRITISH OFFICERS CLUB IN WEST BERLIN. THEIR WIVES SHOP IN WEST BERLIN AT U.S. ARMY FOOD AND DEPARTMENT STORES. THE WESTERN FAMILIES SOMETIMES DRIVE ACROSS TO WEST BERLIN FOR A NIGHT AT THE THEATER OR A RESTAURANT.

THEY FIND IT DIFFICULT, OR AT LEAST COMPLICATED, TO ARRANGE SOCIAL FUNCTIONS IN EAST BERLIN IF THEY HAVE GUESTS FROM THE WEST. THE PASSES THAT FOREIGNERS FROM WEST BERLIN RECEIVE AT THE WALL ARE GOOD FOR ONLY A DAY, AND SO THEY MUST GET BACK ACROSS THE WALL BEFORE MIDNIGHT.

THIS ALL CREATES WHAT DIPLOMATS HERE AGREE IS AN UNUSUAL, LIFE. NOWHERE ELSE DO WESTERN DIPLOMATS LIVE IN A COMMUNIST COUNTRY, BUT CAN LITERALLY SEE THE WEST. AND ALTHOUGH EAST BERLIN IS SLOWLY BEING TRANSFORMED INTO A MODERN CITY, IT STILL PALES IN COMPARISON WITH THE BRIGHT LUXURY OF WEST BERLIN.

AND SO THE WESTERN DIPLOMATS AND THEIR FAMILIES HERE IN EAST BERLIN ARE PULLED IN DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS. THEY LIVE AND WORK HERE. BUT THE FAMILIAR, AND CERTAINLY THE MORE COMFORTABLE LIFE, IS JUST TEN MINUTES AWAY IN THE WESTERN ISLAND THAT WEST BERLIN HAS BECOME.

-1/-

JS/CAK